

Dynamics of Non-State Actors in Conflict: A Multidisciplinary Analysis of the Role of Meira Paibis and Arambai Tenngol in Manipur in Ensuring the Ontological Security of the Meiteis in Manipur

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the roles of non-state actors, Meira Paibis, and Arambai Tenngol, in Manipur's conflict dynamics, focusing on ensuring ontological security for the Meiteis. It employs a multidisciplinary approach integrating sociology, psychology, security studies, and conflict resolution. Through historical analysis and securitization theory, it explores how these groups justify their authority amidst ethnic tensions. The concept of ontological security is used to understand their role in providing stability amid conflict. Drawing from Foucault's power theory and Derrida's deconstruction, it examines control mechanisms and patriarchal dynamics. The study contributes to understanding conflict resolution and the influence of non-state actors in Manipur. By unpacking these dynamics, it sheds light on the complexities of conflict and peace processes.

Keywords: Manipur, non-state actors, Meira Paibis, Arambai Tenngol, ontological security, securitization, power dynamics

Introduction

Manipur, located in north-eastern India, has long been embroiled in conflict, stemming from various socio-political and ethnic tensions within the region. The historical backdrop of Manipur is rich with narratives of resistance against external influences and struggles for autonomy (Bhatia, 2019). The state's complex demographic landscape, comprising diverse ethnic groups such as the Meiteis, Nagas, Kukis, and others, has contributed to the emergence of identity-based movements and organizations (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). Amidst this turbulent landscape, non-state actors have emerged as influential players, wielding considerable authority and shaping the course of events. Central to this phenomenon

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are two prominent groups: the Meira Paibis, traditionally revered as torchbearers of social justice and women's empowerment (Singh, 2017), and the Arambai Tenngol, a male-dominated armed group involved in conflict resolution and security enforcement.

Through this research paper I aim to delve into the intricate dynamics of these non-state actors within Manipuri society, with a particular focus on their collaboration and collusion in navigating the complex terrain of ethnic conflicts and communal tensions. Through an examination of historical contexts, socio-cultural dynamics, and power structures, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these non-state actors have come to dominate the narrative and exert influence within Manipur (Sadokpam, 2023). By incorporating the theory of securitization, which explores how certain issues are constructed as security threats and addressed through exceptional measures, using Foucault's theory of power an attempt will be made to elucidate the mechanisms through which the Meira Paibis and the Arambai Tenngol have framed their actions within a security discourse to justify their authority and legitimacy. Through the concept of ontological security, which pertains to the sense of stability and continuity in one's identity and existence, I try to understand how these groups provide a sense of security and belonging to the Meitei community amidst the turmoil of conflict. Further, an attempt is made to delve deeper into the mechanisms through which such organizations attain agency, seize power from legal agencies, and justify their actions against established rules and regulations, drawing upon insights from an interdisciplinary approach.

By unpacking the complexities of these dynamics, the paper hopes to contribute to broader discussions on conflict resolution, security studies, and the role of non-state actors in shaping the trajectory of conflict and peace processes in conflict-affected regions like Manipur.

Present Day Crisis

The outbreak of violence in Manipur in April 2023 was sparked by a contentious affirmative action measure. The Manipur High Court's decision to order the state government to recommend Scheduled Tribe status for the valley-based Meitei community ignited tensions, a move later criticized by the Supreme Court (Sadokpam, 2023). In response to the Meitei demands, the All Tribal Students' Union Manipur organized peaceful protest marches on May 3rd. However, clashes erupted between Kuki and Meitei groups near the border of Churachandpur and Bishnupur districts following one of these marches, leading to house burnings and violence that quickly spread to Churachandpur town and the Imphal Valley (Kaushik, 2023).

The violence, which resulted in the deaths of Kukis and Meiteis, was not solely fuelled by the ST status issue. Deep-seated grievances had been festering among the Kuki people in the hill districts, who felt marginalized by the state government's handling of indigenous land rights concerns (Sadokpam, 2023). Evictions of Kuki communities under the guise of forest survey efforts aimed at eradicating poppy cultivation exacerbated these tensions (Kaushik, 2023).

Meanwhile, the flood of refugees from Myanmar, particularly from the Sagaing region following the 2021 military coup, added to the insecurity felt by the Meitei community (Mizzima, 2024). Questions were raised regarding the role of central security forces, notably the Assam Rifles, in allowing illegal immigration from Myanmar, leading to accusations of bias towards Kuki communities (Ali, 2024). Incidents involving Assam Rifles personnel allegedly aiding Kuki militants and impeding police operations further fuelled resentment and distrust (Ali, 2024).

Allegations of partisan killings by security forces, coupled with claims of police favouritism towards the Meitei community, exacerbated tensions and deepened divisions within Manipur (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The complex interplay of historical grievances, socio-economic disparities, and external factors like the refugee crisis underscores the multifaceted nature of the conflict in Manipur (Kaushik, 2023).

Amidst the chaos and conflict engulfing the state of Manipur, a profound transformation has unfolded, ushering in the emergence of the Arambai Tenggol from its previously benign existence into a significant force shaping the region's destiny (Simte & Choudhury, 2024). Once perceived as a community-oriented organization, the Arambai Tenggol has undergone a notable evolution, assuming a more assertive and militant posture in response to the escalating tensions and threats facing the Meitei community (Simte & Choudhury, 2024). Concurrently, the Meira Paibis, long revered as torchbearers of justice and guardians of social harmony, have experienced a discernible shift in their role and identity (Bhardwaj, 2019). From champions of civil rights and symbols of grassroots empowerment, they now find themselves mired in controversies and allegations, their actions and motivations scrutinized amidst the tumult of ethnic strife and political discord (Bhardwaj, 2019). This evolution marks a poignant departure from their storied legacy, raising profound questions about the trajectory of social movements and the complexities of identity in a society riven by conflict and uncertainty (Bhardwaj, 2019).

Arambai Tenggol

Arambai Tenggol, meaning ‘dart-wielding cavalry’ in the Meitei language, has emerged as a prominent activist organization in Manipur, operating with a multifaceted agenda that includes activism, armed mobilization, and cultural revivalism (Kuthar, 2023.). Bolstered by significant support from influential political figures such as the titular king Leishemba Sanajaoba and Chief Minister N. Biren Singh, the group has entrenched itself within Manipuri society, wielding considerable influence and legitimacy (Tiwary, 2024). Since its inception as a socio-cultural entity in 2020, Arambai Tenggol has rapidly gained traction, particularly within the Imphal Valley, amassing both public support and administrative clout over a short span of nine months (Tiwary, 2024). Inspired by ancient Meitei warfare tactics, the organization's name underscores its roots in Meitei heritage and tradition (Express News Service, 2024).

With an estimated armed cadre strength of around 2,000 individuals and supported by thousands of vigilante volunteers across the Valley, Arambai Tenggol has become a formidable force in Manipur's socio-political landscape (Outlook Web Desk, n.d.). The group's involvement in clashes with Kuki groups during the violent conflicts of 2023-2024, coupled with allegations of deadly attacks against Kuki-Zo community members, underscores its controversial role in exacerbating inter-community tensions within the state (Kuthar, 2023). Despite accusations and suspicions surrounding its activities, Arambai Tenggol has demonstrated its ability to mobilize political representatives and assert its agenda on a significant scale. In January 2024, the organization convened a meeting of all elected Meitei legislators to discuss strategies for defending the Meitei community amidst ongoing conflict, highlighting its growing influence within Manipur's political sphere (Tiwary, 2024).

Members of Arambai Tenggol are distinguishable by their attire, typically wearing black T-shirts adorned with a red-coloured image of Meitei cavalry and displaying Salai Taret flags representing different Meitei clans. Drawing upon ancient Meitei culture and the historical Meitei kingdom of Kangleipak, the group emphasizes nationalist sentiments and the protection of Sanamahism, the indigenous religion of the Meitei people (Express News Service, 2024). By positioning themselves as defenders against perceived Kuki aggression and leveraging arms obtained through raids on police armories, Arambai Tenggol has garnered significant public support within the Imphal Valley (Outlook Web Desk, 2024). Despite concerns within the security establishment, reluctance persists in taking decisive action against the group due to its entrenched support base and influence (Outlook Web Desk, 2024).

Led by the enigmatic figure of Korounganba Khuman, Arambai Tenggol maintains a visible presence through public engagements and rallies, consolidating its visibility and influence (Kuthar, 2023). As the organization stakes a claim to political relevance with the tacit approval of certain political figures, security agencies remain vigilant, monitoring developments closely amidst Manipur's turbulent socio-political landscape (Tiwary, 2024).

Meira Paibis

The Meira Paibis, meaning 'women torchbearers,' emerged in the 1980s in response to state atrocities facilitated by the AFSPA, 1958, resulting in widespread human rights violations in Manipur (Akoijam, 2005). These women guard neighbourhoods at night wielding bamboo torches to protect against untoward incidents. They also use metal poles to sound alarm bells, signalling emergencies. Participation in the Meira Paibis is often voluntary, but becomes compulsory during crises, with at least one woman per household expected to participate (Thangjam, 2005). Each locality has a 'meira shang' where the women assemble to plan and discuss. During the day, they wear whitish sarongs and often participate in protest rallies and demonstrations, particularly against wrongful arrests or disappearances of civilians. The movement has grown, with groups organized at the state, district, and locality levels, although exact numbers are not available (Sircar, 1984).

Meira Paibi groups focus on various socio-political issues, such as safeguarding Manipur's unity and protesting against drugs and alcohol. They play a crucial role in times of crisis, with members from different groups coming together for collective action, as seen in the Naked Protest following the rape and killing of Manorama in 2004 (Arunkumar & Arun, 2009). These women's activism is not without challenges. While they are praised publicly, they are expected to remain subservient in their homes and communities. Despite this, their engagement in Meira Paibi activities provides them with a sense of empowerment, as they gain respect, recognition, and inclusion in important discussions. However, balancing household responsibilities with activism is a constant struggle for many (Thangjam, 2005). Meira Paibi leaders have highlighted the impact of their collective actions, including the removal of the Assam Rifles headquarters from Kangla Fort in 2004 and the reduction in instances of direct conflict-related violence (Akoijam, 2005). They also navigate gender roles and restrictions, with women taking on protective roles traditionally held by men during conflict (Arunkumar & Arun, 2009).

The Meira Paibis' agency is evident in their grassroots activism, although their efforts are often hidden, manipulative, and aimed at confronting oppressive structures indirectly rather than

overthrowing them directly. However, their role in fanning and playing a parochial role in the ensuing Manipur conflict has raised serious questions about their role as a women's organization aimed at a united Manipur (Sircar, 1984).

Ontological Security: Explanation and Importance

Ontological security refers to the sense of stability and continuity in an individual's self-identity and their cognitive environment. This concept is critical in understanding how individuals and groups maintain a sense of order and coherence in their lives amidst the uncertainties and changes in their external world. Anthony Giddens (1991) introduced the concept of ontological security in his work 'Modernity and Self-Identity.' Giddens posits that ontological security involves having a stable mental state derived from a consistent self-narrative and an environment that feels predictable and reliable. This stability allows individuals to navigate daily life with a sense of confidence and trust in the continuity of their social and physical worlds.

Ontological security extends beyond the individual level to groups and communities. In the context of ethnic and political conflict, like that in Manipur involving the Meitei community, ontological security becomes crucial. The Meitei's ontological security is threatened by ethnic tensions and violence, leading them to seek stability and coherence through collective identities and community actions. Organizations such as the Meira Paibis and Arambai Tenggol play a significant role in providing ontological security to the Meitei community. By engaging in grassroots activism and asserting collective identity, these groups help maintain a sense of continuity and predictability in the face of external threats and instability (Smith, 2019). Their actions can be seen as efforts to safeguard the community's ontological security by reinforcing a stable and coherent narrative of Meitei identity and resilience. Ontological security is a fundamental aspect of how individuals and communities perceive and manage their existence. It is achieved through maintaining a consistent self-narrative and a stable environment (in conflict areas also), which provides confidence and trust in the continuity of life. In conflict situations, organizations that reinforce collective identity and provide a sense of stability become vital in ensuring the ontological security of the affected community (Giddens, 1991; Smith, 2019).

Ontological Security by Mobilizing Collective Action and Through Social Mechanisms

In the current tumultuous landscape of Manipur, both the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis play pivotal roles in providing ontological security to the Meitei community. The Arambai Tenggol, through their militant stance against perceived threats, offer a sense of protection and solidarity, instilling confidence and resilience among their fellow Meiteis (Insights gathered while interacting with the Meitei refugees in refugee camps, 2024). Meanwhile, despite controversies, the Meira Paibis, by upholding traditional values and asserting communal identity, provide a semblance of stability and continuity in the face of upheaval, fostering a collective sense of belonging and reassurance within the community (Arunkumar & Arun, 2009; Sircar, 1984). In short, these non-state actors are providing ontological security to the Meitei community by offering a sense of stability, identity, and protection amidst the turbulent socio-political environment in Manipur through the following measures:-

Stability amidst Conflict. In a region plagued by ethnic clashes and violence, both groups offer a semblance of stability to the Meitei community. The Arambai Tenggol's armed resistance against Kuki militants and the Meira Paibis' vigilantism and community policing activities create a sense of protection and security among Meitei civilians, assuring them that their interests are being safeguarded (Mansour & Salisbury, 2019).

Reaffirmation of Identity. The activities of both groups serve to reaffirm and strengthen Meitei cultural and ethnic identity. The Arambai Tenggol frame their actions as necessary for preserving Meitei unity and integrity against external threats, while the Meira Paibis position themselves as defenders of Meitei values and traditions in the face of perceived cultural erosion and external influence (Giddens, 1991; Arunkumar & Arun, 2009).

Community Cohesion and Support. By mobilizing community members around shared goals and narratives, both groups foster a sense of solidarity and cohesion within the Meitei community. The collective participation in activities organized by the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis reinforces social bonds and mutual support networks, providing individuals with a sense of belonging and collective purpose (Sircar, 1984).

Empowerment and Agency. Participation in the activities of these groups empowers individuals within the Meitei community to take proactive measures in addressing perceived threats and challenges. By joining forces with the Arambai Tenggol or Meira Paibis,

community members feel a sense of agency in shaping their own destiny and asserting their interests in the face of adversity (Author's own insights, 2024).

Psychological Well-being. The presence and activities of both groups contribute to the psychological well-being of Meitei individuals by alleviating anxieties and fears associated with conflict and insecurity. The reassurance provided by the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis instills a sense of confidence and resilience among community members, allowing them to navigate turbulent times with greater assurance (Giddens, 1991).

The Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis offer ontological security to the Meitei community by providing stability, reaffirming identity, fostering community cohesion, empowering individuals, and promoting psychological well-being in the face of perceived threats and uncertainties. Based on interviews of both the Meitei, Kuki, and Naga students (identity not revealed for personal security reasons), the author gleans that the 'modus operandi' adopted by the Meira Paibis and Arambai Tenggol in Manipur to instil this sense of ontological security is through effectively seizing power and obtaining recognition and trust from the people by a combination of parallel governance structures, direct action and protest, as well as intimidation and coercion. The same is explained in detail below:-

Parallel Governance Structures. Both groups have established alternative systems of governance and justice delivery within their respective communities. The Meira Paibis, for instance, have historically played a significant role in maintaining law and order at the grassroots level, often addressing issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, and community disputes. Their presence and interventions have filled the gaps left by formal legal agencies, earning them recognition and trust from the local populace who perceive them as protectors of community interests (Arunkumar & Arun, 2009). The Arambai Tenggol vigilantes have emerged as defenders of their villages against external threats, particularly from armed militant Kuki groups. By taking up the responsibility of safeguarding their communities, these vigilantes have gained the trust and support of the people who rely on them for protection in areas where state security forces might be perceived as ineffective, biased, or absent (Insights gathered while interacting with the Meitei refugees in refugee camps, 2024).

Direct Action and Protest. Both groups have utilized direct action and protest as strategies to assert their demands and concerns, thereby garnering attention and support from the wider population. The Meira Paibis, known for their activism and mobilization efforts, have staged protests and demonstrations against issues such as gender-based violence, human rights

violations, and governmental policies perceived as unjust (Sircar, 1984). Their visible presence in public spaces and their vocal advocacy have earned them respect and credibility among the people who view them as champions of social justice, while the Arambai Tenggol vigilantes have engaged in direct action by actively patrolling and guarding their villages against potential threats. Their proactive stance in confronting Kuki aggressors and maintaining security has resonated with the local community, leading to increased recognition and trust in their capabilities as guardians of community well-being (Mansour & Salisbury, 2019).

Intimidation and Coercion. While less overt, there are instances where both groups have employed intimidation and coercion to establish their authority and control. In conflict-ridden environments where the state's presence may be weak or contested, informal organizations often fill the power vacuum by exerting influence through implicit or explicit means (Arunkumar & Arun, 2009). The perceived effectiveness of these groups in maintaining order and security, even through coercive tactics, can engender a sense of dependence and allegiance among the populace, contributing to their recognition and trust (Information gathered by the author through informal interviews from the Meitei community, 2024).

The Meira Paibis and Arambai Tenggol have obtained recognition and trust from the people of Manipur by leveraging parallel governance structures, direct action and protest, and at times, intimidation and coercion. Their ability to address community needs, advocate for social justice, and provide security in the face of external threats has solidified their position as legitimate actors in the eyes of the populace.

Ontological Security through Securitization

The Theory of Securitization, developed by the Copenhagen School of security studies, offers a framework for understanding how certain issues are constructed as security threats and addressed through exceptional measures (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998). **Securitization** is a process where state or non-state actors transform subjects into matters of 'security' to justify extraordinary measures to address perceived threats. Non-state actors can use securitization to usher in ontological security by framing certain issues as existential threats to a community's identity, stability, and continuity. The same is explained below:

Arambai Tenggol's Securitization. The Arambai Tenggol has securitized the perceived threat posed by Kuki militants to the Meitei community's unity and integrity. By framing the Kuki aggression as an existential threat, they justify their militant actions as necessary for self-

defense and community protection. This process of securitization not only legitimizes their armed resistance but also garners support from the Meitei populace (Smith, 2019).

Meira Paibis' Securitization. The Meira Paibis have securitized issues related to social justice, historical grievances, and cultural identity. They frame their actions, such as vigilantism and community policing, as crucial for protecting the Meitei community from threats like the attacks from Kukis. This securitization of social issues helps justify their role as guardians of Meitei interests and mobilizes community support for their activities (Balzacq, Léonard, & Ruzicka, 2016).

Role of Narrative Construction. Both groups have constructed narratives that frame their actions as essential for the security and well-being of the Meitei community. The Arambai Tenggol portray themselves as defenders against the perceived threat posed by Kuki militants, framing their armed resistance as necessary for community protection. Similarly, the Meira Paibis present themselves as guardians of Meitei interests, emphasizing their role in addressing social injustices and preserving cultural identity. These narratives appeal to collective fears and aspirations within the Meitei community, helping to mobilize support for their agendas (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998).

Mobilization of Support. Securitizing these aspects enables both groups to mobilize support from the Meitei populace. The narrative of existential threats and the need for protective measures resonates with the community's fears and concerns, leading to widespread backing for the actions taken by these groups (Smith, 2019).

Exceptional Measures and Justification. By framing these issues as security threats, both groups justify the adoption of exceptional measures to address them. The Arambai Tenggol justifies their militant actions as necessary for self-defense and community protection against the perceived Kuki threat. Similarly, the Meira Paibis justify their vigilantism and community policing as essential for protecting Meitei interests and identity (Balzacq, Léonard, & Ruzicka, 2016).

Impact on Power Dynamics. Through securitization, the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis enhance their power and authority within Manipur. By positioning themselves as defenders against existential threats, they justify their dominance and control over certain territories and populations. This consolidation of power contributes to the perpetuation of conflict dynamics (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998).

Gaining Dominance. Through the process of securitization, both groups have been able to position themselves as dominant players in Manipur's socio-political landscape. By presenting themselves as the primary actors responsible for addressing perceived security threats, they garner support and legitimacy from the Meitei populace. This support translates into increased power and authority, allowing them to exert influence over various aspects of community life and challenge the authority of established state institutions (Smith, 2019).

The Theory of Securitization provides valuable insights into how the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis have constructed narratives of insecurity to justify their actions and assert their dominance in Manipur. These processes of securitization play a significant role in shaping power dynamics and perpetuating conflict dynamics in the region. In the context of Manipur, the author of this research paper comes to the conclusion that both the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis have employed nuances of securitization to justify their actions and solidify their positions of power and usher in a sense of 'Ontological Security' among the Meiteis.

Foucault's theory of power and the Power Dynamics of the Non-State Actors

Foucault's theory of power offers a lens through which we can understand how the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis exercise and maintain their authority over the populace. In Foucauldian logic, power is not merely a top-down force imposed by the state but is dispersed throughout society, embedded in everyday practices and relationships. Non-state actors can harness this decentralized notion of power to assert themselves and ensure ontological security within their communities. I have tried to associate certain insights offered by Foucault to explain how the two groups operate in tandem to seize power and instil a sense of Ontological Security amongst the Meitei community:-

Disciplinary Power. Foucault argues that power operates not only through coercion but also through disciplinary mechanisms that regulate behaviour and shape individuals' subjectivities (Foucault, 1977). In Manipur, the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis exert disciplinary power by imposing norms and rules that dictate acceptable conduct within the community. Through their actions, such as vigilantism, community policing, and social control, these groups discipline individuals and communities to conform to their ideologies and agendas (Author's own insights). For example, the Arambai Tenggol enforces obedience and loyalty to their cause through coercion and punishment, while the Meira Paibis regulate social behaviour and morality based on cultural norms and traditions (Author's own insights through interviews, interactions, and FGDs).

Bio-power. Foucault also introduces the concept of bio-power, which refers to the mechanisms through which states and institutions regulate populations and manage life processes (Foucault, 1978). In Manipur, both the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis exercise bio-power by governing the lives of the Meitei community and regulating their social, cultural, and political existence (Foucault, 2008). The Arambai Tenggol, through their militant activities and control over territories, regulate the population's security and survival in the face of perceived threats from external forces. Similarly, the Meira Paibis govern the community's social and moral life by enforcing norms and values that uphold Meitei identity and traditions (Author's own insights).

Knowledge and Discourse. Foucault emphasizes the role of knowledge and discourse in the exercise of power (Foucault, 1972). In Manipur, both the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis control the production and dissemination of knowledge and discourse to legitimize their authority and justify their actions. They shape narratives that portray themselves as saviours and protectors of the Meitei community against violent attacks and internal destabilization. By controlling the narrative, they maintain their hegemony over the populace and suppress alternative voices and perspectives that challenge their dominance (Author's own insights).

Panopticism. Foucault's concept of panopticism, derived from Jeremy Bentham's design of the panopticon prison, illustrates how surveillance and visibility are used as tools of power (Foucault, 1977). In Manipur, both the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis employ surveillance tactics to monitor and regulate the behaviour of individuals and communities (Insights as revealed by security officials operating in Manipur). Whether through physical patrols or social control mechanisms, these groups create a sense of constant observation, inducing self-discipline and conformity among the populace (Author's own insights).

Technologies of Power. Governmentality emphasizes the deployment of 'technologies of power' to regulate and shape individual behaviour (Foucault, 2008). In Manipur, the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis employ a range of techniques to govern the Meitei community. These include surveillance, policing, moral regulation, and community organizing. The Arambai Tenggol, through their armed patrols and checkpoints, assert control over territory and resources (Author's empirical observations), while the Meira Paibis exert influence through social norms, cultural values, and community networks (Sircar, 1984).

Dispositifs of Power. Foucault refers to 'dispositifs,' or apparatuses, as the interconnected systems of power that govern societies (Foucault, 1980). In Manipur, the Arambai Tenggol and

Meira Paibis constitute key dispositifs of power, operating alongside formal state institutions to regulate and govern the Meitei community. These groups influence and shape governmental practices, policies, and discourses, thereby exerting significant control over the lives and conduct of individuals within the population (Author's own insights).

Governmental Rationality. Foucault highlights the importance of 'governmental rationality' in shaping governance practices and objectives (Foucault, 1991). In Manipur, both the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis operate within a rationality that prioritizes the protection and preservation of Meitei identity, culture, and territory. This rationality informs their strategies and actions, guiding them in the pursuit of goals such as community defence, social cohesion, and cultural continuity (Author's empirical observations).

Subject Formation. Another key aspect of Foucault's 'governmentality' is the idea of 'subject formation,' which involves the ways in which individuals are constructed as 'subjects of power' through various discourses and practices (Foucault, 1982). In Manipur, these dominant groups play a significant role in shaping Meitei subjectivities through cultural narratives, rituals, and symbols. They define what it means to be a 'true' Meitei and prescribe norms of conduct that align with their vision of Meitei identity (Haokip, 2019). By influencing subject formation in this way, these groups consolidate their power and maintain social cohesion within the community (Author's own insights).

Foucauldian Liberalism. Foucault's notion of liberalism highlights the paradoxical relationship between freedom and governance (Foucault, 2008). In Manipur, the Arambai Tenggol and Meira Paibis navigate this tension by advocating for Meitei autonomy and self-determination while simultaneously exercising control and regulation over the community (Author's own insights). They promote a form of Meitei liberalism that prioritizes collective security and cultural preservation over individual liberties, thereby justifying their intervention in the lives of Meitei individuals (Author's own insights).

In regions where ethnic divisions and political tensions have long simmered beneath the surface, non-state actors like the Meira Paibis and Arambai Tenggol emerge as influential actors in shaping the socio-political landscape. Rooted in the Meitei community's identity and aspirations, these organizations have leveraged a combination of social mechanisms and as explained through Foucault's theory of power, to spread their influence and mobilize support. Foucault's theory of power elucidates how these non-state actors dominate the narrative of power in Manipur by exercising disciplinary power, bio-power, controlling knowledge and

discourse, and employing panoptic surveillance mechanisms. Through these strategies, these dominant groups consolidate their authority and maintain social order within the community (Foucault, 1977; 1980; 2008). Thus, by embedding their power within the social fabric and everyday practices, non-state actors ensure ontological security for their communities, reinforcing a continuous and stable identity amidst external challenges.

Conclusion

The research has endeavoured to analyze the rise of the Meira Paibis and Arambai Tenggol in Manipur through an intricate interplay of social mechanisms, grassroots activism, and Foucauldian power dynamics to engender 'Ontological Security' for the Meitei community. As these organizations navigate the complex terrain of ethnic tensions and political strife, they grapple with the challenges of balancing community interests with state authority, while upholding their one-sided commitment to community justice and collective action. The study reveals that the dynamics of grassroots activism and power relations in Manipur, particularly concerning the Meira Paibis and Arambai Tenggol, represent more than just informal organizations — they embody the aspirations and struggles of the Meitei community (however controversial), wielding influence and shaping discourse for survival through collective action. The Meira Paibis and Arambai Tenggol provide ontological security to the Meitei community by offering a sense of stability and continuity amidst the ongoing ethnic conflict and political turmoil. Through their grassroots activism, these organizations address the existential anxieties of the Meitei people, fostering a collective identity and shared purpose. Their efforts to safeguard Meitei interests, culture, and territory help to reinforce a sense of belonging and security within the community.

Both groups face significant challenges and criticisms. Allegations of overreach, vigilantism, and collusion with vested interests have tarnished the Meira Paibis' reputation as champions of social justice. Foucault's analysis of power dynamics sheds light on the complexities of these criticisms, highlighting the inherent tensions between grassroots activism and institutional authority (Foucault, 1977). Despite these controversies, the Meira Paibis continue to play a crucial role in providing ontological security by maintaining community solidarity and acting as a buffer against external threats. Similarly, the leaders of Arambai Tenggol frame themselves as defenders of Meitei identity and territory against external threats, particularly from the Kukis. Their discourse emphasizes notions of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the historical legitimacy of Meitei governance structures. By framing the conflict in these terms,

they seek to mobilize support and legitimize their actions within the Meitei community. This narrative construction helps to strengthen the community's ontological security by reinforcing a collective identity and a sense of purpose in defending their cultural and political autonomy.

The Meira Paibis and Arambai Tenggol, despite their controversies, continue to play a pivotal role in providing ontological security to the Meitei community. Their narratives and actions, while complex and often contradictory, offer a sense of stability, identity, and purpose in an environment fraught with uncertainty in the Manipuri society.

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